

The savage wars of peace: rhetorics of imperialism from the white man's burden to the war on terror

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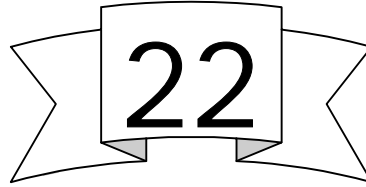
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The Savage Wars of Peace: Rhetorics of Imperialism from the White Man's Burden to the War on Terror

Will Barton

The White Man's Burden

1899

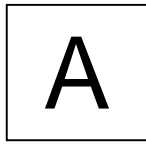
THE UNITED STATES AND THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS

Take up the White man's bur-den --
Send forth the best ye breed -- Go
bind your sons to exile To serve
your captives' need; To wait in hea-
vy harness On fluttered folk and wild
-- Your new-caught, sullen peo-ples,
Half devil and half child. Take up the
White Man's burden -- In patience to
abide, To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride; By o-
pen speech and simple, An hundred
times mad plain. To seek another's
profit, and work another's gain. Take
up the White Man's burden -- The
savage wars of peace -- Fill full the
mouth of Famine And bid the sick-
ness cease; And when your goal is
nearest The end for others sought,
Watch Sloth and heathen Folly Bring
all your hope to nought. Take up the
White Man's burden -- No tawdry
rule of kings, but toil of serf and
sweeper -- The tale of common
things. The ports ye shall not enter,

the roads ye shall not tread, Go
make them with your living, and
mark them with your dead! Take up
the White man's burden -- And reap
his old reward: The blame of those
ye better, The hate of those ye
guard -- The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light: --
"Why brou-ght ye us from bondage,
"Our loved Egyptian night?" Take up
the White Man's burden -- Ye dare
not stoop to less -- Nor call too loud
on freedom To cloak your wear-
iness; By all ye cry or whisper, By all
ye leave or do, The silent, sullen
peo-ples Shall weigh your Gods and
you. Take up the White Man's bur-
den -- Have done with childish days
--The lightly proffered laurel, the ea-
sy, ungrud-ged praise. Comes now,
to search your manhood through all
the thankless years, Cold-edged
with dear-bought wisdom, the judg-
ment of your peers!

-Rudyard Kipling

The Savage Wars of Peace



s the nineteenth century drew to a close, the United States was engaged in fierce debate over whether to engage in expansionist and unilateral military action employing massive military superiority for material gain in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Phillipines. Mark Twain, a member of the Anti-Imperialist League, rewrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic:

Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the sword
He is searching out the hoardings where the stranger's wealth
is stored;
He has loosed his fateful lightning, and with woe and death has
scored;
His lust is marching on.

(Cited in Paterson et al, 1995, 20-24)

Twain's faction lost the argument. After the sinking of the USS Maine at Havana, Congress voted for war against Spain and the United States became, albeit not in name, an imperialist power. One of the leaders of the war party was Theodore Roosevelt who resigned his post as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in order to lead his Rough Riders into battle.

In February, 1899, Roosevelt's friend, Rudyard Kipling, the unofficial laureate poet of British imperialism, published to the American people his heartfelt plea for them to take up their share of the god given duty of the white race to civilise the rest of the world. On the very day that *The White Man's Burden* was published, Fillipinos rose against the American colonists who had replaced the Spanish ones. On the following day, US forces were committed to the suppression of the Phillipines.

The White Man's Burden is a remarkable, if distasteful poem and, while hardly representative of Kipling's work, has been responsible for a significant proportion of the loathing felt by many people for him. Despite his reputation, Kipling was by no means a crude racist. In works such as the *Ballad of East and West* (although its refrain is often quoted out of context to make it seem the opposite) he specifically opposes racism and asserts that good men are equal despite their skin colour. Kipling had been brought up by and among Indian Hindus and had a love and respect for their culture. Yet *The White Man's Burden* is undoubtedly a bluntly and offensively racist work. He invites his reader

To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild -
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child

This seems to be a crude piece of propaganda and an ambivalent and ineffective one at that. The ostensible message of progress and duty is undercut by a tone of great bitterness and a sense of futility. The white man foreswears the easy life of civilisation to take its benefits to others. Empire is in the interests not of the imperialists but of the subject people, although they are unable to see this. The white man's sacrifice, although a divine duty, will be unappreciated. His reward will be "The blame of those ye better,/The hate of those ye guard" and not only will he receive no thanks from these, their laziness and stupidity will render much of the cost in vain:

Take up the White Man's Burden -
The savage wars of peace -
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch Sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hope to nought.

Nevertheless, the task must be undertaken, for it is right.

As a recruitment ad for empire builders, it sends a very mixed message, but perhaps that is not the point. After all, hard headed colonists out to profit from sweated native labour are not going to be swayed by poetry. The function of *The White Man's Burden* is rather mythological than directly propagandist. Its injured tone, its resentment at lack of appreciation and its absolute certainty of the rightness of its position feed the hypocrisy, cant and self-deception that in the twentieth century were to become the hallmark of the imperialist consciousness. It is the self-serving rhetoric of the sadistic schoolmaster who administers beatings claiming "this hurts me more than it hurts you". It is the lie of the abusive parent who is only chastising the child for its own good.

And it is the voice of Tony Blair taking his country to a war that it clearly and expressly does not want to undertake, for the good of the country we are attacking, who also, ungratefully, do not want to be attacked. All done with the quiet confidence that God is on his side, despite the fact that the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and most of the world's religious leaders repeatedly urged He was not.

State Rhetorics of Terrorism

Within modernity, revolutionary glamour and terrorism have constantly been opposed to the state's claimed monopoly of death and glory. In 1988, Guy Debord, looking back over twenty years of politics

since the finest hour of Situationism, identified the characteristics of a form of state in which traditional political discourse was rendered trivial, since “For the first time in contemporary Europe no party or fraction of a party even tries to pretend that they wish to change anything significant.” (Debord, 1998; 21). In such a state, where the Society of the Spectacle (Debord, 1994) has replaced democratic debate and the role of effecting change in society and culture has been handed over by government and the state to the market, a logical spiral leads inexorably to conflict between the residual state (still seeking to maintain its central *raison d’être*; the monopoly of violence and any force that opposes the status quo. The injured tones of politicians complaining of the Ingratitude of the people are delightfully captured:

But of all social crimes, none must be seen as worse than the impertinent claim to still want to change something in a society which has so far been only too kind and patient; but *has had enough of being blamed*.

(Debord, 1998; 27; italics in original).

Wars, even Wars Against Terror, can achieve little in a market-governed world. They can uphold and endorse the decisions of the market, but will never be able significantly to oppose them, since the financial resources to prosecute such a war could not, by definition, be made available. As I have argued elsewhere, the function of war at least since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has shifted fundamentally from one of coercion, operative primarily in the theatre of action, to one of rhetoric, operative principally in the sphere of media consumption. (Barton Catmur, 2000). In the case of the interventions in the Balkans, this was also the opinion of Hume (2000, 77): “... this anti-Nazi crusade was staged primarily for the benefit of the Westerners involved”

Since the main aim of war is now to present a media event securing the acquiescence and compliance of the domestic population, war fought against other sovereign states for territory or strategic advantage does not play well. What is required is a war against Bad People. Since the Society of the Spectacle provides all good things to all good people, the enemy must, perforce be someone, not merely with different objectives, but motivated by clear and unrelieved malevolence.

Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is *to be judged by its enemies, rather than by its results*. The story of terrorism is written by the state and is therefore highly instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with

terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic.

(Debord, 1998; 24; italics in original).

Because the Society of the Spectacle is perfect, opposition to it can only be motivated by unreasoning hatred, religious fanaticism or, in the last resort, sheer Evil. Because of this, both terrorism and the war against it are condemned to operate in secrecy, through conspiracy.

States which originated in armed struggle, revolutionary violence, genocide or ethnic cleansing are quick to categorise those using such methods against them as common criminals, motivated by irrational forces of religious or cultural hatred ("They hate our freedom and democracy"). Cultures currently in denial about their own violent underpinnings, yet enraged by attacks upon them, notably Israel and the US construct narratives of denial and rewritings of history to facilitate a discourse of righteous violence, justified as retaliation or prevention.

Cultures in denial about their own violence employ rhetoric of counter insurgency as a mask for repression. In the American War on Terror, an ideology of the US as a passive victim of powerful and evil forces is being constructed and reinforced by an ahistorical history propagated through popular culture. Recent Hollywood productions have furthered this vision.

Tony Blair's Pearl Harbor

On September 11, 2001, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was about to address the Trade Union Congress when the news of the attack on New York came through. Blair went immediately to the rostrum where he announced the news and explained that in accordance, he was sure, with the wishes of delegates, he would leave immediately to ensure that Britain stood shoulder to shoulder with her American Ally at this time. There is much to commend in Blair's performance. He is admirably calm, firm and decisive. He speaks briefly and to the point and creates the convincing impression of a leader exercising firm control in a crisis.

That air of quite competence and determination contrasts strongly with his demeanour prior to receiving the news. Blair was facing a potentially hostile crowd and was going to be called upon to justify unpopular measures that favoured Capital and business at the expense of the workers represented by the delegates in the hall. He clearly felt more at ease in the role of international statesman than that of a politician confronting his constituents.

Blair was insistent that Britain must stand alongside the US "shoulder to shoulder" just as the US had stood by Britain in the war against

fascism. Here a remarkable elision of history occurs. Blair likened 9/11 to the London Blitz, implying that the US had been supportive of Britain at that time. In fact, at the time of the London Blitz, America was maintaining studied neutrality and her ambassador to London was regularly advising the President that Britain's fall to Hitler was only months, if not weeks away.

Blair's approach conforms to a revisionist view of history which is making considerable headway within the popular culture and understanding of the English speaking world. In this alternative history, the USA, acting from no motive beyond truth, freedom, democracy etc., voluntarily enters the war on Britain's side and makes the world safe for truth, freedom, democracy, etc.

What is truly disconcerting about the British Premier's adoption of a wilful misreading of Anglo-American history is that it was exactly prefigured only months earlier in *Pearl Harbor* (Brookheimer, 2001). This film portrays a serving USAF pilot fighting for the RAF in the Battle of Britain at a time when the US was a neutral power. Hollywood has always been happy to mythologise the role of the US in war and history, as have most national cinemas for their own nations. The difference between *Pearl Harbor* and, for instance *U571* (Mostow, 2000) is important, however. While the latter merely transposes the credit for a particular action from the British to the US Navy, the former portrays an entirely revisionist political history.

Rethorising Warfare after Vietnam

What was at the time perceived within and outside America as the defeat of US forces and the victory of Ho Chi Minh's NLF occupies an important place in the history of war politics. In the early part of the war it must have seemed inconceivable to many Americans that their massive technical, economic and numerical superiority would not make victory inevitable. The undignified scramble to get out of Saigon at its fall was widely interpreted as demonstrating the weakness even of a global superpower in the face of a united and hostile population engaged in guerilla struggle, and also, by many socialists as indicating the direction in which history was flowing.

Subsequent events have made possible a recontextualisation of that conflict as a battle within a larger war - a war, moreover, in which the US won.

This is contained within the thesis of a remarkable book, *The Shield of Achilles*, by Philip Bobbitt (2002). Bobbitt's contention is that the conflicts of Europe and the US from 1914 to the 1990s should be seen as a single war between democracies and undemocratic regimes, in which the former emerge victorious with the fall of the Soviet Union. In

the course of this epic struggle, the state in the more economically advanced countries undergoes a transformation from Nation State to "Market State". Bobbitt's taxonomy of historical state forms, including, *inter alia*, the Princely State, the State-Nation and so on may be idiosyncratic but has about it a certain logic so long as one accepts the limits within which his study is confined.

Despite his invocation of Homer, Bobbitt is concerned almost exclusively with the history of modern Europe and North America. Thus, the two designated World Wars, the Russian Revolution and civil war, the Spanish war, the Cold War and colonial liberation struggles are all part of the big picture. Postcolonial Africa, in which for half a century large scale war has been a constant presence, is hardly mentioned.

This is not the place to debate the validity or otherwise of Bobbitt's classification of state forms in renaissance and early modern Europe, productive as that may be for historians and political scientists. The important distinction for our purposes is the transition he identifies from Nation State to Market State. The Nation State is the product of 19th century European nationalism. It is posited on the ethnic, religious and cultural unity of a people, located in a geographic space largely or exclusively occupied by them. The market state is multicultural and multi-ethnic. It commands the loyalty of its citizens, not through blood and soil but by satisfying their consumer demands. Its citizens are bound together only by economic considerations and may well be highly diverse ideologically, even to the point that many may oppose the regime for religious, ethnic or political reasons. It is defended, not by great conscripted citizen armies but by a professional standing army. Because of its internal tensions, this has to be supplemented by increasingly powerful and clandestine "security forces" - in other words a much expanded secret police:

A state that privatizes most of its functions by law will inevitably defend itself by employing its own people as mercenaries - with profound strategic consequences. A state threatened with cyberattacks on its interdependent infrastructures can protect itself by virtually abolishing civil privacy or by increasing official surveillance and intelligence gathering or by expensively decentralizing. Each course has profound constitutional consequences.

Bobbitt (2002)

Bobbitt is good enough to acknowledge that much of his thesis is owed to others - notably to Eric Hobsbawm's conception of the short 20th Century. Whilst, however, it makes sense for a Marxist and post-communist historian to identify the period of the existence of the USSR as distinct and distinctive, it is less obviously appropriate to Bobbitt who

seeks to conflate communism and fascism and see the whole period as a single war between democracy and totalitarianism.

Such a thesis is somewhat harder to sustain when one remembers that the USA and USSR were allies from 1942-45 and that the Soviet contribution to the defeat of the Third Reich was massive and arguably greater than that of America, certainly involving considerably more sacrifice.

The elision of such inconvenient facts is facilitated by the general tendency of Hollywood to write out from its war stories any contribution of its allies. The only narrative function of the RAF in *Pearl Harbour* is to provide the aeroplane in which the American hero can defend England. Once he is shot down, the Battle of Britain is over for the purposes of the film. In *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) the only flag, beside Old Glory, is the French Tricolore flying over the war cemetery at the start of the framing narrative. The Germans are seen entirely from the American's perspective, rarely speak (other than to shout war cries or to surrender) and are as dehumanised an enemy as the orcs in *Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001, 2002). The only other non-Americans are the French peasant family who put in a brief appearance. From their costumes, they seem to have strayed onto the set from filming *Jean de Florette* (although their accents give them away) and are understandably bewildered. They add nothing to the plot development. Hollywood's reading of the war is clear - all the important stuff was done by Uncle Sam.

Bobbitt's market state theory and the re-reading of 20th century history undertaken by Hollywood and implicit in the rhetoric of Bush and Blair offers a Disneyfication of the comparative roles of Western powers in the conflicts of the last long or short century. This can be glossed as the view that Europe was essentially politically unstable and unable to resolve its conflicts, that in both World Wars, the US intervened for largely moral reasons and that that intervention was decisive on the side of right. It then protected Western Europe from the predations of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact until the moral superiority of free market capitalism proved economically more resilient than state socialism. With the collapse of the USSR and its socialist satellites, the world enters a new phase of history, freed from the fear of massive superpower nuclear confrontation.

The theory has been voiced many times by many people but never better than in a letter from Mr Herb Greer (2002) to the *Spectator*. Writing "as an American living in England", Greer castigated the timid British for their failure to offer wholehearted support to the USA's war on Terror and related aggression against Iraq. Specifically he made the assertion that America had entered the second world war in order to save the world from fascism and Britain from German invasion, or to use his own delicate terminology: "If it wasn't for the Yankees, mate, you'd all

be speaking Kraut.” This drew a response from the novelist Michael Moorcock, (2003) writing “as an Englishman living in America” and pointing out that the USA was at war with Germany because Hitler had in fact declared war on the USA, somewhat after the threat of invasion of Britain had been lifted by the opening of the Eastern front.

Rather than embracing their liberators, many Europeans (like, it seems, many Iraqis today) were deeply suspicious of American motivation during the years following 1945. A legacy of cultural opposition and resistance coexisted with a military anticommunist alliance. The tendency of American thought was to oppose democracy to socialist totalitarianism and so to expect Western Europe to join it unreservedly on the side of democracy. Europeans were more likely to view themselves as occupying a space between the authoritarian socialism of the USSR and the untrammelled capitalism of America.

The USA refused to support the military adventurism of Britain and France in the Suez Canal debacle. In the 1960s no European nation gave military support to the US in Vietnam.

The perception grew among US military and political circles that Europeans were unreliable allies. This intensified as the USA became increasingly the agent of global capital in the aftermath of the fall of the USSR. America became more distrustful of its allies the less it needed them. The more unchallenged American hegemony, the more America found itself alone and the more openly imperial became its behaviour.

From imperialism to Empire and from the nation-state to the political regulation of the global market: what we are witnessing, considered from the point of view of historical materialism, is a qualitative passage in modern history. When we are incapable of expressing adequately the enormous importance of this passage, we sometimes quite poorly define what is happening as the entry into postmodernity. We recognise the poverty of the description, but we sometimes prefer it to others because at least postmodernity indicates the epochal shift in contemporary history.

Hardt & Negri (2000)

The necessity for conflict to give meaning and function to political structures has become once again apparent as the uneasy - and never peaceful - peace of the cold war recedes.

The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our con-

versations and increasingly our airwaves. And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble. And those who have the least meaning in their lives, the impoverished refugees in Gaza, the disenfranchised North African immigrants in France, even the legions of young who live in the splendid indolence and safety of the industrialized world, are all susceptible to war's appeal.

Hedges (2002)

European sensibility stands at a point from which it may develop in a number of directions, but there are good reasons to doubt whether that development will be sympathetic to that of the US.

The multiculturalism of the market state is highly problematic. The USA has traditionally seen and portrayed itself as a "melting pot" of ethnicities but this is hardly reflected in the attitudes of its government.

Increasingly, the USA is choosing to take a unilateral position in international affairs. It withdraws from existing treaties and declines to endorse new ones. It seeks to circumvent or, if necessary, simply ignore, decisions of the United Nations.

The highest places within the American state and economy are increasingly occupied by people with extreme right-wing evangelical Christian convictions. As Tariq Ali (2002) points out, two fundamentalisms face each other in the 21st century.

The logical necessity of this structural conflict, this interdependence of enemies, is summarised by Gray (1997, 97):

Notice how important the enemy is, if war is to survive. Without an enemy there is no conversation. This is a realisation that warriors have never lost, although in modern times it has had to be disguised in the rationalisation that the function of war is making peace. Actually, war has always been a conversation.

An economically united Europe will be the largest single economic bloc in the world in the 21st Century. It is entirely possible that the Euro will replace the Dollar as the main currency of international exchange. It would be entirely indicated that Europe and Russia will seek ever closer cooperation and mutual support. A key element in these developments will have to be a rapprochement between Europe's nominally Christian (though largely, in practice, non-religious) majority and a large Muslim minority. The admission of Turkey to the EU and the resolution of the war in Chechnya will make EU support for wars between US dominated international capital and Islam untenable.

One of the ways in which Europe has been perceived as faint-hearted by its American ally is its comparatively low level of defence ex-

penditure. While the constituent nations of the EU remain separate economies, it would be very difficult for one of them to make big changes to its defence expenditure without destabilising its economic relationship within the Union. For a single European economy to do so would be entirely possible. There is no obvious reason that, if the EU satisfactorily integrates its economies, it could not equal or surpass the defence spending of any other power bloc by the middle of the century.

An increasingly united and selfconsciously multiethnic and multicultural Europe, cautious about military adventurism and imperialism and profoundly secular, will find itself positioned culturally between the competing fundamentalisms of Indian subcontinental political Islamism and the bible-belt capitalism of a simultaneously imperial yet solipsistic America. There is no foregone conclusion about the direction of European violence in the 21st century.

Why does all this matter? Haven't war stoiries from the Iliad onwards romanticised and heroised the grubby business of conflict? Hasn't war reporting always been stagey propaganda? Haven't all cultures tinkered with their history to airbrush out their dishonorable deeds and to promote their manifest destiny?

Up to a point. The Iliad praises bravery and skill\ at arms but never seeks to avoid the grisly nature of combat:

Aeneas now charged in and with his sharp spear struck Apharus son of Caletor on the throat, which happened to be turned towards him. The man's head lolled on one side; he crumpled up under his shield and helmet and soul-devouring Death engulfed him. Meanwhile Antilochus, seizing a moment when Thoon's back was turned his way, leapt in and struck. He cut clean through the vein that runs right up the back to the neck. Thoon dropped backwards in the dust, stretching his hands out to his comrades in arms. Antilochus fell upon him and began to strip him of his armour; but with a wary eye, for Trojans were coming up on every side.

(Homer, 1950)

War reporting has been biased and partial from its beginning. If, as the cliché has it, the first casualty in war is the truth, that is at least in part because to a combatant, truth is less important than victory and in any culture that has mass communications, all citizens will be combatants in any war. The most up to date technologies and media will be employed for disinformation purposes. Thus in the American civil war, action photographs were staged and faked. In the 1914-18 Great European War, newsreel film of combat was scripted, rehearsed and acted.

Yet the manipulation of history for propaganda within popular culture is in some ways more pernicious. We expect "factual" accounts to be

biased. We know better than to believe what we read in the papers. The more sceptical of us, confronted with stories of atrocities, massacres, rape camps and the like will look back over centuries of such allegations and reflect that they are as likely to be complete inventions, like the Germans bayoneting Belgian babies in 1914, as to be sober fact and that in very few if any wars is the use of atrocity restricted to one side. For a full account of the extent to which combat brutalizes all who engage in it, see Joanna Burke's *An Intimate History of Killing*. (2000)

But in entertainment, our guard is down and this is where mythology, in Barthes' (1957) sense is created. Thus *Pearl Harbor*, *Private Ryan*, *Schindler's List* and a host of other films all take place in an alternative history in which the second world war was fought by the USA and Britain as a moral crusade against the holocaust. The Russian sacrifice is totally elided. The indifference of the Allied governments to the plight of people in the death camps and their refusal to divert any part of the war effort to disabling their assembly lines of death, despite the entreaties of the Jewish authorities is never mentioned.

Hollywood was condemned for simplifying history out of existence, reducing reality to a neatly dichotomised clash between good and evil. Its stifling approach to human relationships neglects a whole world of authentic and rich human experience, while its weakness for stereotypes risks leaving it disconnected from life as most people experience it. As a result the full possibilities of a medium that has the potential to be the most powerful ever employed remain unfulfilled. Ever more ambitious special effects cannot conceal the emptiness that lies at the centre of Hollywood's soul.

- Gledhill (2002)

It is the same prelapsarian world in which America was settled and populated by hard working, independent individualists in the name of freedom and equality, the embodiment of the European enlightenment. It disguises the bedrock of genocide and slavery that underpinned that settlement and its legacy, whereby the US imprisons a higher proportion of its citizens than any other country and a shockingly disproportionate number of those so incarcerated are black. For a popular and populist, yet well researched polemic on this, see Moore, 2002.

Nor does Hollywood restrict itself to the rewriting of actual history. Even fiction may be deemed unsuitable. The recent film, *Master and Commander: the Far Side of the World* (Weir, 2003) is based on a novel (O'Brian, 1997) in which a Royal Navy ship, engaged in protecting British whalers, is in combat with a United States vessel:

'The French fleet is out,' thought Stephen, three parts awake. 'I must get to my instruments – go to my station – God between us and evil.' Then waking a little more as his bare feet plunged into the rainwater swilling to and fro under his hanging cot, 'Nonsense. This is the New World, and we are at war with the Americans, ridiculous as it may appear.'

(O'Brian, 1997, 140)

and later:

Why, they saw the poor old Fox being fair pulled to pieces by an American frigate that was not only taking her new fore-topmast out of her but also transferring what oil and spermaceti she had won ... into another whaler

(O'Brian, 1997, 227)

In the film the action is transposed to the Napoleonic war and the enemy becomes a French privateer. Presumably it was felt that in a year that saw the Americans and British engaged in an action of questionable morality in the invasion of Iraq, in the teeth of French opposition, it would send confusing signals if the film reminded people that international alliances change over time and no nation always counts as the good guys.

Phillip Noyce's film, *The Quiet American* (2002) made the mistake of sticking to the original text:

The release last Friday, albeit only in New York and Los Angeles, of Philip Noyce's rendering of *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene's classic novel of 1955, was more significant than it might have seemed. Beyond the colour and intrigue of the film itself lies a story of studio intrigue and, indeed, cowardice. This is a work that nearly never saw the light of day, at least not in America.

The film, starring Michael Caine as a world-weary correspondent in Vietnam in 1952, when France's hold on Indo-China was coming undone, was completed more than a year ago. But its distributor, Miramax, was afraid to put it out. Not because it is any kind of dud; on the contrary, now that it has finally surfaced, there is talk of an Oscar nomination for Caine. No, it was much worse than that. Miramax was nervous that the American public would be offended by it.

Usborne (2002)

In fact the film had a remarkably short run in most of the USA. It was off the screens of all major theatres within a couple of weeks of release.

Meanwhile the non-white, non-English speaking world is mythology-sed as intractably Other. All Arab Muslims (indeed all Arabs and all Muslims) are fanatical believers in an irrational creed and so potential terrorists. Because they are beyond reason, it is the duty of the White Man to rule them, to control and discipline. They are the “fluttered folk and wild ... Half devil and half child”.

Only a few years previously, the people who could not be trusted to govern themselves were the Serbs.

The new phase in human history opened with NATO's bombing of Serbia on March 24 1999. “The new generation draws the line”, Tony Blair proclaimed, fighting “for values”, for “a new internationalism where the brutal repression of whole ethnic groups will no longer be tolerated” and “those responsible for such crimes have nowhere to hide”. NATO has unleashed the first war in history fought “in the name of principles and values”, Vaclav Havel declared ...

Chomsky (2000)

But, of course, wars are always fought *in the name of* principles and values. From the White Man's Burden to the War on terror, a casual rhetoric of self-serving historical delusion and of racial superiority cloaks the naked use of power in self-interest. That world is reflected in the elisions and distortions that can be discerned in news reporting and in popular culture.

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